Chapter 18

The ethics of social movement research

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The processes by which knowledge is constructed, that is to say the selection of research questions and methods as well as the researcher's epistemological commitments, have an impact on the knowledge that is generated. We can go as far as to claim that social 'science is power, for all research findings have political implications' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 6). If this is potentially the case with any type of research into the realm of social sciences, it is even more so for the study of political contention, social movements, and grassroots activism. For instance, there is a close relation between the way researchers relate to the research objects and the type and quality of information they gather. It is a matter of relationship building as much as it is an epistemological and ontological question.

The field of social movement studies demands a special engagement with the ethical dimensions of research for a number of reasons. Firstly, as social movements are bearers of 'new ways of seeing the world' (Cox and Forminaya 2009, 1), social movement research cannot ignore the knowledge and the political imaginaries movements themselves have produced: not only should research operate within the boundaries of said political imaginaries, it should also be respectful of the processes and reflexive practices (often participatory, horizontal, 'from below') that led to the creation of said knowledge. By way of example, researchers investigating participatory social movements should ideally try to embed some of those very same participatory mechanisms in their research design.

Secondly, there is a certain degree of risk associated with political dissent in authoritarian and democratic countries alike. Bridging activism under the spotlight and disclosing its dynamics might expose activists to surveillance as well as repression, jeopardizing their activities if not subjecting them to personal threats. Involving activists in a research project has consequences which cannot be ignored, and which should play a key role in designing and implementing any research project centred on political activism.

Thirdly, participants in social movements are typically highly invested subjects who tend to expect from the researcher, and might even demand, some sort of political alignment with the principled ideas they embody. Access to the field might occasionally be negotiated on this ground, even by those movements whose political views we might disagree with. An ethically informed positioning of the researcher in relation to the values and practices of the movement becomes then crucial not only in view of gaining access, but also to further reciprocal understanding and mutual respect, and the preservation of some necessary boundaries between the two groups.

Fourthly, research is 'labour' not only for researchers but also for research objects. In involving activists in a research project, the researcher competes for, and uses up, the activists' limited resources such as time, which might otherwise be employed in a different way, including advancing the movement's goals. Interrogating the notion of research as labour for both activists and researchers might help the latter to develop rational and realistic expectations concerning the engagement of the former in a research project; it will also foster equal and fair relationships

between the two.

Engaging with ethical issues of research on social movements begins with recognizing that 'there is no such thing as apolitical and / or neutral research' (Fuster Morell 2009, 21). It implies interrogating our role of researchers, by addressing the divide between research, action, and policymaking, as well as the differences between the organizational cultures of academia and activism respectively. But it also calls into question dimensions and processes internal to the social movements themselves, such as political learning, collective memory, impact, and self-assessment, which represent potential areas for effective collaboration between the realms of activism and academia. In practice, engaging with the ethical dimension of social movement research means envisioning a viable ethics of engagement that considers the specificities of the research objects and respects their political subjectivities. Questions worth asking include, *to whom should research matter?* In other words, researchers should critically explore the purposes a research might serve, its intended and unintended consequences; what audiences are addressed, and which data serve which ends. 'Higher order' epistemological questions like *what is equitable collaboration ('co-labour') in principle, and how does this equitable collaboration work in practice* could help in bridging the gulf created by two radically different organizational cultures and routines, academic individualism on the one hand and activist collectivism on the other, which would ultimately result in stronger empirical research and improved field relationships.

This chapter develops around four main 'questions' which relate to the study of social movements and political dissent. They address distinct ethical sides of the research process, by interrogating the epistemological approach to socio-political research on social change activism

(in other words, how do we get to know what we know), and its ontological practice (what knowledge is produced, as well as methods and relation-building activities). Each question emerges within one or more phases of the research project, from the selection of research questions to the choice of methods, from data gathering to data analysis and theory building, to the publication of research results.

The first question examines the *relevance of the research* for the research objects, namely the activist community. It concerns both research questions and theory development, and starts from the premise that social movement researchers should concern themselves not only with theory development, but also with the promotion of social change and empowerment broadly conceived. The second question specifically addresses the *risks* for the researched that come along with the study of their dissent practices. It reflects on the need to balance the imperative to know and investigate social dynamics, their frames and action repertoires, with the prerequisite to protect groups and individuals and their activities, which more often than not are fragile even in democratic states. The third question deals with the grey area of *power*, in recognition of the unbalanced relationship that research typically establishes between the investigator and the research object. Social scientists usually operate from their positions in universities, 'center[s] of power and privilege' (Lewis 2012, 228) whose dynamics of knowledge production and dissemination are at odds with the 'grassrootedness' (van Roy 2004) embedded by movement activists, that is to say their experiential evidence and their knowledge-sharing ethos. Finally, the fourth question addresses the issue of *accountability*, that is to say the obligation for social movement scholars to be accountable to their research objects, and to take into consideration their 'social and political ontologies and epistemological practices' (Chesters 2012, 153).

Each 'question' represents a challenge, and, as we shall see, comes along with a strong self-reflexive component. The assumption that guides this chapter is that reflexivity, or 'the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the "human instrument"' (Lincoln and Guba 2000, 183), is a central axis of the research process, and a mechanism central to the ethical engagement with the realm of activism. Reflexivity is an iterative and permanent process, and a dialogical one, able to situate the researcher in a horizontal relationship with the research object, and transforming the researcher into the object of his own scrutiny. What is more, reflexivity, far from being simply an internal hidden process, must be rendered visible if it is to harness fair relationships with the research objects. Thus, not only should the questions of relevance, risk, power, and accountability be asked and taken into account throughout the investigation, they should also result in an explicit elaboration and description of the research in practice and on the field, one that explores the researchers' standings and the advantages as well as limitations of their approach.

In what follows, I explore the four challenges, and I suggest for each of them a practical approach to fieldwork that takes both epistemology and methodology into account. I reflect on both the value and effectiveness of such approach in relation to social movements and social change, as well as its desirability. The chapter builds on existing literature, and on my experience with studying collective action on the web, and radical internet activism[1] in particular. It also

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[1] By radical internet activism I mean collective action in cyberspace that addresses network infrastructure or exploits the infrastructure's technical and ontological features for political or social change. Examples include the creation of alternative infrastructures of digital

offers some snapshots on the research practices implemented by the Media/Movement Research

Action Project (MRAP, http://www.mrap.info), based at Boston College, Massachusetts, and

directed by sociologists William Gamson and Charlotte Ryan, as one of the paradigmatic groups

working to raise and answer ethical questions within the field of social movement studies.

The question of relevance

In 1845, Karl Marx argued that 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various

ways; the point, however, is to change it'. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, his verdict

might be still valid for students of social movements who face a constant tension between

objectivity and subjectivity, detachment and full participation.

With the progressive institutionalization of social movement studies, scholars have increasingly

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communication, online civil disobedience, distributed denial of service attacks aimed at making

websites temporary unavailable, and leaking classified information. Radical internet activism

provides an excellent opportunity to reflect on the interaction between researchers and activists:

inspired by the anarchist values of autonomy and self-determination, radical internet activists do

not aim to influence institutional policy-making processes by lobbying, advocacy, or protest, but

rather seek to bypass regulatory, technological, or political constraints and engage in

prefigurative politics by creating their own digital communication infrastructure. Usually

organized as collectives of equals, they reject any formal leadership and representation, and they

are critical of mainstream academia (Milan 2013). All interviews with activists quoted in this

chapter can be found in Milan 2013.

concentrated on theory development. If on the one hand this has fostered the growth, reputation and visibility of the field, and has enhanced the quality of the research being produced, it often came at the expense of a fruitful connection between the producers of scholarly knowledge and the constituencies that should benefit from their work. As a result, 'movement theorists often speak to themselves (. . .) the field often produces work that is distant from, and irrelevant to, the very struggle it purports to examine. The consequence is an artificial divide between the practice of social change and the study of such efforts' (Croteau et al. 2005, xii–xiii). But there is more to that. Chesters (2012) argues that the 'implicit positivism that is underpinned in the idea that we live in a "social movement society"', where protest has allegedly become a conventional form of democratic participation, has resulted in movements being perceived as 'objects of knowledge for academics, rather than as knowledge-producers in their own right' (Chesters 2012, 145). This might result in social movements being reduced to 'commodifiable objects of knowledge' to enhance one's career, as opposed to acknowledging their role as creators and proponents of 'alternative political imaginaries—a politics of possibilities—and theories of knowledge about how to actualise these imagined possibilities' (Chesters 2012, 145–7). Furthermore, the field is not yet fully immune from a tendency towards flattening social reality into opaque empirical objects, both cohesive and fixed, whereby the 'collective reality exists as a thing' (Melucci 1988, 330) rather than a set of situated complex relations and casual mechanisms that continuously shape and reshape the movement.

One could address the question of the relevance of a given research project to social movements by questioning the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the research subject. Croteau (2005) appropriately suggests raising the question of what knowledge should be

produced and for whom. Flacks goes a step further, arguing that there is a 'moral dimension' to social movement studies. In his view, 'if your research was focused on the relatively powerless and disadvantaged, you had an ethical obligation to enable them to use the results (. . .) the study of social movements ought to provide movement activists with intellectual resources they might not readily obtain otherwise' (Flacks 2005, 7–8). The issue of morality goes beyond the boundaries of the public function of research often conducted with public funding, and into an uncharted land where not all researchers might want to wander. Without invading the private sphere of individual motivations, it might be useful to think about the presupposed moral dimension of social movement research in the guise of an ethical obligation on the researcher to provide knowledge that is both useful to and respectful of social actors, and away from its ancient Greek meaning of 'norms guiding individual conduct' (which in turn seems to imply some erroneous superiority of academic knowledge over movement knowledge).

The question of relevance comes into play in the preliminary stages of a research project as well as in the theory development phase. For example, the perception of the existence of an artificial divide between practice and study of social change might have some practical consequences, most notably in negotiating access to the field. During my research on radical internet activism, I was often met with the resistance of those activists who refused to engage with my interview questions or refused me access to activist meetings, on the ground that social movement research does not really address their concerns, its findings being often trivial and irrelevant to the daily work and challenges of the activists (Hintz and Milan 2010).

How can a researcher effectively address the question of relevance, possibly from the perspective

of the activists themselves? What epistemological and ontological approaches can best work to empower social movements? In what follows, I briefly outline a series of possible approaches that take into account the challenge of producing scholarship able to speak also to social movements.

Perhaps the most familiar among the many processes of knowledge production involving both research subjects and objects is co-generative inquiry, which emphasizes joint collaborative efforts by research professionals and stakeholders. Within this framework, Stoecker (2005) called for increased activist involvement in the research process, greater attention to process, appropriate time lines, mutual respect, sustained communication, and a focus on effecting social change. Most of these suggestions emerged within critical approaches to qualitative research, and within the participatory action research perspective, whereby scholars are believed to 'have a responsibility to do work that is socially meaningful and socially responsible' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 34; see also Freire 1968,whose early work on the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' has inspired many action research scholars).

Participatory action research 'aims to solve pertinent problems in a given context through democratic inquiry in which professional researchers collaborate with local stakeholders to seek and enact solutions to problems of major importance to the stakeholders' (Greenwood and Levin 2005, 54). The latter are to be involved in the research process because of their situated knowledge of the problems under study. Validity criteria in participatory action research are strongly linked with action and the promotion of positive social change: co-generated knowledge is 'deemed valid if it generates warrants for action. The core validity claim centres on the

workability of the actual social change activity activist-researchers engaged in, and the test is whether or not the actual solution to a problem arrived at solving the problem' (Greenwood and Levin 2005, 54). Knowledge that is impossible to apply is 'not "knowledge" at all' (Greenwood and Levin 2005, 55).

MRAP researchers have long experimented with innovative participatory research involving social movements in view of empowering them. As a rule, they seek to design their research in order to provide movement organizations with intellectual resources, and jointly develop possible solutions to their problems. In an article co-authored with activist Karen Jeffreys and summing up a decade-long research relationship that emerged in the framework of MRAP, Charlotte Ryan explored the 'two-way, dialogic exchanges that create new, generalizable knowledge' and can result in the 'democratization of theorizing' (Ryan and Jeffreys 2008, 4). Ryan and Jeffreys argue that both theorizing and practice would benefit if scholars 'embed themselves in movements, not simply as active citizens but as skilled learners' (Ryan and Jeffreys 2008, 3). The two groups, recognizing their complementary differences, should establish learning communities based on shared learning practices and work routines. Shared conceptual knowledge and methods must be developed over time, through 'iterative cycles of dialog, action and reflection' (Ryan and Jeffreys 2008, 4). In this way, social movement scholars can support activists' 'ability to learn from practice' (Ryan and Jeffreys 2008, 3), and to embed their learning in the collective social memory. In turn, scholars benefit from activists' experience-based feedback, situated knowledge, and direct observation. To say it with Chesters, such an approach recognizes that 'social activism produces critical subjectivities whose contextual and situated knowledge is both independent of the academy and valuable in its own right' (Chesters 2012,

146).

We can see the learning communities practices by Ryan and Jeffreys as a way of practicing an approach to co-generative inquiry that we will call *engaged research*. By engaged research I mean those inquiries into the social world that, without departing from systematic, evidence-based, social science research, are designed to make a difference for disempowered communities and people beyond the academic community. They may, for example, address issues of concern to the disadvantaged, or may support the attempts by social movement activists to set the agenda of policymakers (see, for example, Ryan at al. 2010). Engaged research recognizes the status of movement activists as autonomous and sophisticated knowledge producers, ones that 'can make sense out of what they are doing, autonomously of any evangelical or manipulative interventions of the researcher' (Melucci 1996, 389). Further, it starts by asking 'what kinds of knowledge do movements produce' (Cox and Forminaya 2009, 1), and how they produce said knowledge, and seek to reproduce, whenever possible, similar practices of knowledge generation (as mentioned above, researchers might try to mirror the participatory approach of movements in their investigation).

However, engaged research does not call for the blurring of the boundaries between activists and researchers; rather, it acknowledges the reciprocal roles, with their own strengths and drawbacks, and tries to build on those. Engaged research represents one of the possible translations into practice of what Melucci (1992) called 'situated epistemology', one that takes into account the contextual elements of knowledge production, as opposed to simply considering merely its outcomes, and, most importantly, embeds the investigation in a relationship, as opposed to

standing above or outside the research object (Melucci 1996). Maintaining a critical distance is no longer an issue, as reciprocal roles and functions are discussed, embodied in the relationship, and respected throughout the process.

Engaged research departs from the acknowledgement that for the most part researchers and activists embody different motivations and investments, which are reflected in (and risk jeopardizing) the interaction between the two groups. One such discrepancy is to be found in what the two 'gain' from the research, which concerns for example material aspects and different understandings of 'labour.' For instance, the interview process requires from both an investment of time and resources, but whereas for academics this is part of the day job and leads to material earnings, for the other side it is part of the leisure time and thus reduces the time that is available to gain income (or to work for social change). This imbalance cannot easily be resolved (by payments to the activists, for example) as it is grounded in a deeper clash between different organizational cultures, work ethics, and motivations, that is, between those whose interest in an issue is part of the job and those who work voluntarily on an issue for social and political reasons.

The discrepancy in motivations and investments, as well as the question of relevance, can be effectively addressed by selecting research questions that matter not only to scholars but also to the activist community. When conducting engaged research with radical internet activists, I tried to put the research design at the service of both activism and scientific data gathering. In practice, it meant that research questions had to relate closely to the daily interpersonal practices of the activists for them to accept the research as legitimate and engage with it, even when those

needs were not immediately self-evident, nor easy to translate into research questions functional

to the research. For example, a question on personal motivations and individual engagement,

which at a first sight might not seem conducive to movement empowerment, by their own

admission helped some activists to reflect on themselves in a way they rarely do, busy as they are

in running internet servers. In their own words, the questions 'initiated long interesting

discussions within the group. That is a very welcome side effect of the whole thing. It helps us to

clarify our positions on the issues.'

The question of risk

'In the past, we did not participate in any surveys/interviews etc. It was a decision based on the

assumption that social science[s] are too often a police science plus that it is never clear who is

going to use this research', replied a collective of radical internet activists I contacted for an

interview. In fact, activists might consider the collection of information about them as

detrimental to their activities. For example, an activist explained his opposition to research on

social movements as follows: 'mapping out the way networks inside the activist movement work

can be very harmful for the groups, and for other groups as well, as it gives insight in the least

understood part of activist movements. And I'm very happy most police forces and security

services do not understand that part at all.' On this point, Flacks argued that, 'one ought to be

sensitive to the possible ways your work could be used to perpetuate established social

arrangements and repress opposition' (2005, 7).

The question of risk surfaces at different stages in the research project: research design, data

analysis, as well as theory building. It is important that the researcher takes active steps to protect the activities and the identity of the research objects, negotiating with the latter what can be revealed. In what follows, I touch upon a couple of aspects connected to the question of risk.

Often activists disguise their identity behind pseudonyms, or behind masks during protest demonstrations. Research can violate this attempt to remain outside the public (and, particularly, government) spotlight. What is more, protecting the anonymity of interviewees and their projects is particularly challenging in times of tight cybersecurity measures and blanket cybersurveillance plans. It is a must for researchers to protect the identity and privacy of activists by negotiating the level of disclosure of sensitive information, up to the point of avoiding using real names and disclosing information that might facilitate identification by third parties. In addition, in the case of sustained online exchanges, researchers should encourage activists to use email encryption. But they should also resist any request for activist data by law enforcement, while taking steps to protect the digital supports where data is physically stored, for example by encrypting computer hard drives. Furthermore, they should be aware of the risks in terms of privacy and surveillance connected with the use of commercial email services such as Gmail, as well as commercial social networking services like Facebook, for activist-academic interactions. This is something that often escapes the activists' scrutiny but should nonetheless be kept in mind by scholars who commit to protect their informants—recently, a radical internet collective called on movement activists to abandon commercial platforms in reaction to their built-in security flaws, and to avoid endangering activist projects and initiatives (Nadir 2012).

In response to the activists' concerns about state surveillance and social science being a 'police

science', it is essential to constantly question the amount and quality of data that is gathered about activists, and to plan carefully the release of such data and its publication in view of reducing the potential harm for research partners. This means not only to anonymize individual and group names, when needed or asked for, but also to look critically at what connections between groups are exposed, what tactics are revealed, and to weigh the costs and benefits of each release. During my work with radical internet activists, I realized how published research results on, for example, group size, work practices, motivations, networks, and alliances, may play into the hands of those who want to shut down alternative communication systems. In deciding to investigate groups that seek to avoid exposure and usually do not operate publicly as recognizable entities, I have committed to avoiding the release of any sensitive information about actions, strategies and networks I might have come across during fieldwork—even if at times this went against my calling as a social science researcher to communicate research findings.

The question of power

A closer look at activist-research interactions reveals a set of divides that concern differences in organizational cultures and routines, in motivations and values, and in the gains and potential losses of the research for each side. These differences can be subsumed to the notion of power, which in turn speaks to the unbalanced relation between the subject and the object of research. The question of power plays a role in particular in the phases of methods selection and data gathering, but should be kept on the horizon throughout the research project and even after its conclusion (including, for example, in the publication phase). It is a matter of relationality and reciprocity, and it entails considering the 'unfolding of obligations and limitations developing

from the relational dimension of the interaction. This requires one's own position of power, security or vulnerability to be open to analysis and contest' (Chesters 2012, 155). The question of power becomes even more crucial for those doing research on, for example, indigenous communities (Lewis 2012), or particularly historically disenfranchised groups who might have suffered from adverse ontological elaborations put forward, among others, by academics.

To be sure, suspicion toward academics and their endeavors is quite diffused amongst movement activists. Often, this does not come out of the blue but is based on direct experience. Activists might be left with the impression that researchers 'take advantage' of activists merely to further their careers, while activists and their movements do not benefit from the research. Collaboration between the two often ends as soon as researchers have sufficient material to meet their needs. In addition, academic careers are based on reputation and thus on the 'name' of the researchers, who, through research results and publications, will to some extent engage in the exercise of definition and assessment of the instances of activism they have studied. The researchers may then assume a position from which they end up speaking 'on behalf of' the movement, and are recognized as an authority in the field, while those who actually create counter-expertise and engage in the action remain out of the spotlight. For all of these reasons, researchers might not be welcome in the field, and might have to engage in lengthy negotiation processes with the activists prior to any investigation. As Ryan and Jeffreys acknowledged, 'In settings in which communities have endured periodic research infestations with little ostensible gain, scholars may need to engage in prolonged dialogues and experiments with activist partners to clarify the value of scholarly research' (2008, 16).

Whereas academia is an individualized endeavor, with individual researchers typically working on their own research projects and developing an individual reputation for themselves, activism is typically based on a collective approach. As a way of addressing the individual vs. collective tension, and of safeguarding the collective nature of activism, one can bring back to the center of the research design the relevant entity, typically the group or network. This may have practical implications, for example when responses to interview questions are formulated by the whole group over prolonged periods of time, as opposed to by individual informants; but it has implications also for the broader nature of researcher-activist interaction and understanding. As one of my interview partners noted, internet activist groups 'are collective enterprises,' and addressing individuals within the group means 'breaking down the collective dimension of the group'. Consequently, I engaged in online asynchronous interviews (Kivits 2005) that involved the whole group, considerably extending the duration of the data collection phase (some interview processes lasted over a year!).

Researchers might also consider adjusting methodologies and ways of relating to research partners to the ways 'in which social practices are defined and experienced' (Hine 2005, 1). In other words, researchers should try to reach social actors where they feel more comfortable, in the very *locus* of their activism, be it offline or online, in the streets or in policy arenas. They must also act in accordance to the rules of interaction typical of that environment. As Hine wrote, 'Social research methods have always had to be adaptive. Methods, after all, are not neutral devices' (Hine 2005, 2–7). For activists who are familiar with and comfortable in technologically mediated environments, such as radical internet activists, e-mail interviews proved to be an excellent, and perhaps the best, method of eliciting thick data out of groups and individuals.

Internet, however, is socially and culturally situated. Creating connections, situating oneself in the activists' environments, and relating to their value systems can lead to adopting their communication practices, including styles and jargon. With internet activists, for example, closing the gap between different ways of interacting and communicating (one based on the name and reputation of the individual versus one fiercely protecting anonymity and putting group action before individuals) implied the adoption of a nickname and an e-mail address from an activist provider, the implementation of email encryption, and the publication of research findings in accessible formats and platforms. In general, it helps if the researcher shows familiarity with the field dynamics and the issues that are relevant to the interview partners—in the case of radical techies, issues of privacy, surveillance, and alternative models of intellectual property and knowledge sharing. Finally, as we have already seen, collaboration with activists typically implies an imbalance in both the investment in, and the material gains from, a research project. In the process of developing strategies to address this problem that are contingent to each project, one should discuss with interview partners the potential gains and outcomes for each side. As a token for participation, the researcher might also earmark an amount of financial resources to be awarded to activist projects, or reserve some research time to be devoted to activities able to support activism on the ground.

Bridging the significant gulf between researchers and activist groups requires a serious effort to build a research relationship based on clarity, reciprocal respect, and trust. As Kvale (1996) noted, an interview should be seen as 'inter-view', that is, an 'interchange of views between two people conversing on a theme of mutual interest'. This is deemed valid for participant observation as well. In both instances of qualitative data collection, it appears to be crucial to

remember that the Latin meaning of 'conversation' is 'wandering together with': hence, creating equal and mutually comfortable 'wandering' circumstances is essential. As interviews, and to a less extent participant observation, imply unequal relations, with the interviewer creating and controlling an artificial situation and defining topics and questions, particular effort is needed on the side of the researcher to mitigate this asymmetric exercise of power. In the process of negotiating access to the field and in situating themselves in the middle of action, researchers might find useful the classification of field-roles by Snow, Benford, and Anderson (1986). The three scholars have identified four archetypical fieldwork roles, namely the 'controlled skeptic', the 'ardent activist', the 'buddy-researcher', and the 'credentialed expert'. Each field-role yields to a certain type of information. The buddy-researcher position, for example, fosters a 'blending of the role of researcher and friend' which 'entailed receiving as well as giving' (Snow et al. 1986, 384).

Finally, building a trusted relationship means allowing for extended exchange before the actual interview starts and long after the interview is over. This exchange, often in the form of e-mail, can last for weeks or even months before data collection can begin; the same is true for the cases in which the connection is kept alive by some form of collaboration between researcher and activists that might have emerged in the course of fieldwork. However costly, these exchanges are vital for researchers to establish themselves as trustworthy interlocutors; face-to-face meetings and participant observation at activist gatherings helps to forge meaningful connections, as does being responsive and collaborative also after the end of the research project.

The question of accountability

Activists tend to hold researchers accountable for their doings. For example, they challenge the self, motivations, and standpoints of scholars: particularly when dealing with social justice issues, researchers find themselves constantly interrogated about their motivations and the aims of the inquiry—a process that might occasionally be emotionally demanding. Hence, studying activism forces researchers to re-negotiate and re-define their self as well as their ontological and epistemological commitments, in interaction with their research objects. Reflexivity then becomes a central axis of the research process. Reflexivity is 'a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself' (Guba and Lincoln 2005, 210). Reinharz singled out three distinct categories of selves we embody in the field: 'research-based selves', 'brought selves' (those shaping our standpoints), and 'situationally created selves' (1997, 5). Each has a distinctive voice that comes into play in the field. Interrogating the three of them might help the researcher to understand how these selves influence our research.

Notwithstanding the difficulties that this might cause, researchers have to accept this very personal exposure as a legitimate part of the conversation. The difficulty is not just the need for self-reflection, which may at times be unpleasant or may even lead to serious crises, but more prosaically the need for consistent engagement in developing and continuously reshaping one's identity on the field, the objectives of the research project, and the researchers' motivations in a way that is acceptable to the researched.

The question of accountability intervenes in the phases of data analysis and theory building, but

should play a role also within data dissemination and publication of research findings. It addresses numerous challenges: trying to find a common ground despite the different 'professional' languages; the tension between individualism and collectivism; and the emphasis on 'practices' of practitioners vs. the accent on theory development among academics. In practice, accountability translates in a set of measures that, if taken seriously, contribute to building bridges between academia and the social world from a perspective of social change. One such measure is translation. By translation, I indicate the conversion of a unit of meaning (e.g., a research question, a theoretical concept, an empirical finding) expressed in a certain language (in our case, the professional and epistemological language[s] of social sciences) into an equivalent meaning in another grammar (here, a discourse that can be understood by activists). It concerns the research cycle from beginning to end, but is particularly relevant in the dissemination of findings; it operates in two directions, from the researcher to the activist and vice-versa. It means, for example, making the research questions not only intelligible to our research partners, but also meaningful to their ontological concerns. It requires adopting research methods that respect the ways social practices are experienced by practitioners. It also bounds researchers to share their research findings in an activist-friendly format useful for action or self-reflection, in view of taking findings back to the field (Adler 1996).

But, especially, it requires both researchers and activists to engage in a process of mutual learning, which is at the core of conducting research *with* social groups, processes, and events (as opposed to research *about*).

Whereas most current social science is research *about* (social groups, processes, events—

research that tends to treat the movements' concerns 'as secondary or relative to their own specific ontology/cosmopology' [Chesters 2012, 148]), engaged researchers aim to make research *with* (i.e., in collaboration with) these subjects. Research about is usually considered to be the only objective, and therefore the only scientifically sound research, on the grounds that the observer is sufficiently detached from the object of study. Research *with*, however, is grounded on a similarly solid scientific basis. But it requires a commitment from both sides to collaborate and come to terms with the reciprocal differences; it demands a long-term time frame, recurrent cycles of reflection, and constant adjustments along the way. Furthermore, research *with* is not only possible but also desirable. If we cannot deny the existence of a potential contradiction between engagement and academic rigorousness, the former does not have to come at the expense of evidence-based scientific research. The types of questions being asked, and the way we ask them, as well as the methods we select to approach social actors may partially differ, but the results can be equally systematic. It is at this stage that reflectivity comes in again: researchers should be ready to regularly question their identities and roles as researchers immerged in a complex and challenging social world, torn between science and action.

Conclusions

This chapter started off with the ambition to provide a ready-to-use ethical checklist for research on social movements and political contention. It outlined four questions researchers should ask themselves throughout the research project and in recursive exercises of self-reflection, and against which they should ideally weight their epistemological and ontological commitments as well as their methodological choices. The chapter showed how '[m]ethod cannot be separated

from ontology, and ontology has epistemological consequences', as Chesters nicely put it (2012, 157). Here, ontology refers to the knowledge and prefigurative politics movements typically embed, and epistemology indicates the way knowledge is produced by both activists and researchers. Table 1 summarizes the four questions addressed in the chapter, and offers a bird's eye view on potential approaches and methods to be used in the field.

Engaging with the ethical dimensions of social movement research, however, is not an easy task, and not one that is encouraged by a system, that of contemporary academia, that tends to reward speedy publication and cost-efficient research projects. I do hope that those engaged in academic thinking will be encouraged to take up the challenge, and situate themselves in a position as to 'participate in the uncertainty, testing the limits of their instruments and of their ethical values' (Melucci 1996, 395). In doing so, they would contribute to bridge the gap between the practice of prefigurative politics and its study, by contributing to democratize theorizing, and in the long run, to fix the endangered relationship between social movements and academia, and their respective epistemologies.